

TOWARDS A FILM LANGUAGE IN THE FEMININE:

THE FILM WORK OF JOYCE WIELAND

How do you make a culture? The beginnings: by honoring, passing along that which has been in the background, always in the picture but without names or a language to speak in.

In Wieland's work, both the films and the visual art, the woman is seeing, and what she sees matters. Her films make a language which represents the emotions, represents the other, represents the country, its arts and its artists, its history and its politics, its landscape and its peoples. Hers is the impulse to make myth: to give our culture its story, the larger frame in which the story can be told.

Wieland's film work breaks codes continually, remaking film language in such a way that her system of representation has the potential to speak to a public, an audience, in such a way that the audience can see itself and thereby become community.

In 1973, a group of women -- Betty Ferguson, Garonce Mapleton, Judy Steed and Joyce Wieland -- wrote a statement "Canadian Home Movies" in the catalogue for a national travelling exhibition, Women and Film. The statement clearly articulates the need for a film language other than that which is in the mainstream, and proposes, as a model, to undo our colonial vision by using the home movie to see the home place, the family, the domestic within the Canadian landscape as home. The woman seeing/making the film whom they speak of is not unlike Tom Thomson, who also saw Lake Scugog, who made the familiar "strange," not estranged but different, thus giving a clarity of vision which refuses to be colonized:

The 8mm camera purchased by the husband can generally be used by the woman and the child (the last to be liberated). The woman takes the camera . . . holding this expensive piece of technology in her eager hands (afraid to make an expensive mistake) she makes a rocky pan across the beach, to find Jim and the dog at Lake Scugog . . .

'Jim and the Dog at Lake Scugog' is an interesting film, a true example of Canadian folk art. A personal view of Canada, never to be reviewed. Because shaky pans, jiggly zooms, and some out-of-focus sections of the sky are "wrong things." There's a right and a wrong way of looking at the sky in our society.

8-mm home movies have developed a visual language built up partly though so-called errors: an important folk area, as important as the personal and naive art hidden in barns, garages, and in the back forties across Canada. Possibly our

richest expression is the hidden culture of our land, the folk art tradition.

We have little knowledge of what women have done in 8-mm film. But we can only refer to the great numbers of folk artists such as Lea Caron of Quebec to make our guess. The guess is that it's rich and unexposed. Maybe we should pay attention to this kind of film -- lowly, non-commercial, attendant to sunrises, cutting the baby's hair, picnics, birthdays. In doing so we might raise our consciousness to the point of seeing the Canadian grass roots.

Being a colonized nation, we are generally ashamed of what we are. It's easier to jerk off to the latest American film no matter how idiotic. But many of us are now looking at the home-made film product from the farms, suburbs, factories. Some cannot embrace this kind of film as film per se. Home-made footage is passionate, it glances at mountains, a lake, at the snow falling in the garden, the over-red faces at the Aberfoyle fall fair, joyous in their isolation, in the Canadian field of basic badly-spliced film records. What has filmmaking got to do with Canadian identity and Canadian independence? How do you avoid American ownership in your own film?

Canadian women in English Canada have very little of their own film tradition to draw from in the commercial areas. I would rather be influenced by a working woman's film (one who has shot fifty feet of 8-mm film for the first time) than by anything else done by anyone else in the world at this moment. Her vision will help me create greater solidarity with Canadian sisters in farms and suburbs.

We and she are part of an intricate and devastating problem, that of being a colonized person and a woman.

This extensive statement by three filmmakers, Wieland, Steed and Ferguson, along with a mythical character, Garonce Mapleton (invented for the occasion, a New Brunswick poet, now dead) speaks of the need for a film language which is other than a colonized vision. In Wieland's film work, this film language comes from the female body's seeing: she is recording that process of finding a film language which fits the space of the country and its people. For Wieland, Canada is a woman -- the landscape is she.

EVENING ONE:

Water Sark (1966, colour, 14 minutes)

For Wieland, this film represents the process of discovering the self (and herself) in a film lexicon other than that of the woman as glamorous object. She records herself at the kitchen table, seen in and through the reflective surfaces of mirrors, prisms and water. There is an intensity of awareness: of seeing and being seen. In an interview with Hollis Frampton (another filmmaker with whom she made A and B in Ontario), she says, "the table, the kitchen table, has been the core of all my art; since I was a child it was at the table I did everything else on . . . and I started to make films on that table . . . I made a lot of Peggy's Blue Skylight on it, and some of Larry's Recent Behavior and then the final triumph of the trilogy is Water Sark. As I put in the notes to the Filmmakers' Catalogue, 'it's the housewife is high.'"

loses but that the myth is constructed using Canadian historical conflicts.

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EVENING TWO:

Cat Food (1967-68, colour, 13 minutes)

A formal film, again in the home, but the subject here is consumption: eating and being eaten. Joyce's cat Dwight is seen consuming a number of fish. The white tablecloth gradually becomes bloodied; there is a relentlessness to the camera, which doesn't look away but continues to record the violence of the eating. The image is reminiscent of Jean Chardin's paintings.

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Pierre Vallières (1972, color, 45 minutes)

The Quebec writer Pierre Vallières, author of White Niggers of America, is seen in close-up: we are situated at the mouth of Vallières, the place of his utterance so that what he says is mediated by the sensuality of mouth and lips and tongue. We see the document itself and hear the 400-foot rolls of film being loaded, and note the shift in topic. We see his talking, the translated English text in white letters over the red mouth, and we hear his continuous voice -- the impassioned speech. The metonymy of the framing draws attention to what is outside, the larger picture, and forces us as viewers to move back. We see the document uninterrupted by cutaways and have just that record of time, that moment of his talking.

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lens - & shutter*

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Birds at Sunrise (1985, colour, 10 minutes)

An evocation of mornings, beginnings and blessings. The 23rd Psalm, read in Hebrew, is the invocation: it refers to landscape and and that which is spirit. The film, like the psalm, is a pastoral prayer: "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil." The birds are between two worlds, mediating the sky and the earth -- their sound, a song of

life. The image observed within the moving circles gives the movement of day, of life, of new beginnings and thus represents a cycle moving away from death and endings.

-- Leila Sujir, February 1987